



PROJECT MUSE®

Response to Amy Olberding, "Philosophical Exclusion and
Conversational Practices"

Eric Schliesser

Philosophy East and West, Volume 67, Number 4, October 2017, pp. 1038-1044
(Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2017.0090>

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of
Comparative Philosophy
Volume 67 - Number 4

University of Hawai'i Press



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/673992>

- 26 – Christian Coseru (Comment 38), “Can We Make Philosophy a Little Less Provincial?” <http://www.newappsblog.com/2012/06/can-we-make-philosophy-a-little-less-provincial.html> (accessed February 2, 2016).
- 27 – r (Comment 50), “Philosophy’s Western Bias and What Can be Done about it,” <http://www.newappsblog.com/2014/09/philosophys-western-bias-and-what-can-be-done-about-it.html> (accessed February 2, 2016).
- 28 – Ibid.
- 29 – The assumption in this style of advice is that “mainstream philosophy journals” would be eager for Asian philosophical work if specialists would but write and submit it. However, the data do not support optimism on this score: despite significant and measurable surges in scholarship in Asian philosophies over the last many decades, purportedly mainstream journals typically show no increase in their publication rates of this work. For data and commentary on this issue, see Amy Olberding, “Chinese Philosophy and Wider Philosophical Discourse: Including Chinese Philosophy in General Audience Philosophy Journals,” *APA Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophies and Philosophers* 15, no. 2 (Spring 2016).

Response to Amy Olberding, “Philosophical Exclusion and Conversational Practices”



Eric Schliesser

Department of Political Science, University of Amsterdam
nescio2@yahoo.com

A full third of the book is devoted to “Buddhist themes,” and although I am unfortunately unqualified to comment on its exegetical and interpretative quality, I can report that I found the discussion fascinating and enlightening. Priest gives us clear, precise, technical, and philosophically sophisticated theorizing based around these thinkers, giving the lie to the not-uncommon trope among analytic philosophers that so-called “continental” and Eastern thought are inherently woolly, without rigor.¹

At the start of her insightful and disconcerting essay, Amy Olberding mentions that “while responsibility for the conversational practices” (that she has “assayed”) that “exclude” and are forms of boundary policing “are not evenly distributed throughout the profession, they likewise belong at once to everyone and to no one, influencing how our interactions transpire but rarely are consciously adopted or mindfully endorsed.” In reading these remarks I expected her to outline, perhaps obliquely, the

powers and persons who have more of this responsibility and who may very well know what they are doing. Yet, when she returns to the question of responsibility, while commenting on the partially “salutary” use of “we” to “reference the profession at large,” she notes that “it does succeed in identifying the problems of inclusion as collective action problems, and it likewise implicitly acknowledges collective responsibility for exclusion.” There is no contradiction in her position: within a collective some may have more responsibility than others. Yet, more can be said.

Much of the evidence that Olberding reports, analyzes, and deconstructs is drawn from blogs. In checking out her references to these, I noticed that at another collective, *NewAPPS*, I had curated (or edited) two of her main sources of information, and that a third blog post by Mohan Matthen was a direct response to one of these.² While I am not a journal editor nor employed at a leading Ph.D. program in professional philosophy daily shaping the minds of “our students,” I am at least partially responsible for prompting and providing a space for certain discussions that, indeed, constitute and reconstitute performative patterns of exclusion³ and, thereby, also put some fellow scholars in the position of “supplicant.” It is no outright coincidence that I have been asked to comment here.

The exclusionary effects of the patterns of conversation Olberding discusses and dissects are real. But she is also a bit one-sided in presenting the nature of the disciplinary discussion today. For example, one particular series of conversations was prompted by a remark by David Chalmers that I had reposted (with permission) on *NewAPPS*. The remark is significant because of Chalmers’ philosophical and sociological significance in the discipline and his role in two leading departments (NYU/ANU). He shapes and influences many discussions,⁴ including discussions about the norms of the profession⁵ and has provided part of the technological infrastructure (*Phil Papers*) that is leveling access to intellectual resources and, non-trivially for the present topic, treats different niches of philosophy with equal respect. The point is not merely to praise Chalmers; rather it is to note that he is somebody who is actively engaged in shaping the institutions and norms of the profession. I quote:

Having spent the last week thinking about Buddhist philosophy of mind—an enormously rich tradition that anticipates numerous key ideas in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind—it’s a little stunning that hardly any of the leading research departments of philosophy in the anglophone world employ anyone who specializes in Buddhist philosophy, or indeed in any area of non-western philosophy. How hard would it be to change the conventions so that every department would be expected to have at least one specialist in non-western philosophy?⁶

It is clear that (in 2012) Chalmers does not think it would be “very hard” at all for “leading research departments” to hire somebody in Buddhist philosophy of mind. But it has to be admitted that in 2017, NYU has more than twenty-five faculty members, yet, as far as I can tell, still nobody who specializes in Buddhist philosophy (or even the intersection of Buddhist philosophy and analytical philosophy of mind).

Some readers may well think, *talk is fine, but hiring decisions are better* (I return to this below because such hiring is not what Olberding advocates).

What about the discursive practice here? This is clearly an attempt to shame his peers (“a little stunning”) into recognizing their own ignorance and to be aware that they are reinventing many central intellectual wheels (“anticipates numerous key ideas”). The underlying thought seems to be that having somebody around who really understands Buddhist philosophy of mind can facilitate and speed up the development of analytic philosophy of mind. Olberding could at least have recognized that here the supplicants have found themselves a powerful ally, who with little effort (“last week”) authoritatively recognizes the value of some of the treasures the supplicants are offering.

Even so, in returning to Chalmers’ comment with the benefit of Olberding’s paper, it is also noticeable that Chalmers’ comment is given from the perspective of work in contemporary analytic philosophy of mind, and the implicit justification that is being offered for inclusivity appeals to a mixture of intellectual integrity of and utility to (presumably a “core” or “mainstream” bits of) the analytic enterprise (it is mainstream because it takes place at the “leading” departments). The inclusivity is, after all, rather narrow: it is focused on Buddhist philosophy of mind. While undoubtedly Chalmers personally would respect the intellectual pursuits of an expert in Buddhist philosophy of mind, the discursive practice implicitly relies on the idea that such an expert could perform a valuable *service* to research at a “leading research department” in the vernacular of analytical philosophy. Chalmers’ brief remarks are not an invitation to re-think the institution of philosophy as such, and (let’s stipulate, without intent) cement some of the more noxious practices that Olberding objects to. As the curator of Chalmers’ comments, I regret that I have also participated in practices that reinforce certain disciplinary boundaries and “wall out” among would-be-peers, including a hierarchical conception (“leading”) of the profession.⁷

I have since moved on to *Digressions&Impressions*, where I continued promoting disciplinary discussions (none of these contributions are mentioned by Olberding), but where I hope fewer of the objectionable features Olberding notes are present.⁸ In particular, and most important to the issue of supplication and favor giving, (1) I diagnose and analyze servility as a structural feature within contemporary professional philosophy.⁹ (I return to this below.) Along the way, I note that, (2) convinced by Joel Katzav, we should conceive of philosophical competence as the skillful “understanding of more than one philosophical tradition,”¹⁰ and I articulate this without privileging any particular tradition or combination of traditions. Of course, I, too, have to practice what I preach, and while I fall short of the ideal, I (3) now routinely share my intellectual adventures in attempting to gain understanding of another tradition, which is known as “Islamic philosophy.” As an aside, this tradition is simultaneously at least partially Asian philosophy—a fact that I do not always see recognized when even experts discuss “Asian philosophies.”¹¹ Furthermore, (4) I explore the ways in which the purportedly “cosmopolitan” and urbane self-conception of philosophy¹² can be traced back to a contingent act of exclusion of

so-called “rustic wisdom” that gets reenacted throughout philosophical history.¹³ Of course, the Asian philosophies that Olberding wishes to promote are, to the best of my knowledge, not “rustic” in either the original or another sense, but the point of these posts was to force recognition that from Socrates onward “we” (yes!) routinely and unnecessarily conceive philosophy in terms of certain kinds of exclusionary acts toward alternative ways of engaging philosophy or being philosophical. Finally, (5) I note that recent explorations by Alison Gopnik of the influence of Buddhist thought on Hume are “leading to a revolution in Hume scholarship.”¹⁴

The preceding paragraph is a bit defensive, but it also helps explain the perspective from which I write the present comments. We need to recognize that some of the “committed gatekeepers”¹⁵ may recognize “the collective action problems” and can be interpreted as aiming to change the status quo in rather explicit ways for others, including the way in which such conversations take place. I presume that Olberding’s own paper is a contribution to the effort at making philosophers “increasingly more sophisticated in appreciating the complex social operations that influence the profession,” so that our peers more quickly recognize and alter the implicatures of such conversation.

However, inclusivity runs up against scarcity, not just of money but of time (in the curriculum, in attentiveness, etc.), including the danger of oblivion in posthumous memory. Given scarcity and given preexisting intellectual and psychological fondness for the status quo that disciplined us, there are, all things being equal, quite a few institutional barriers to advancing Olberding’s position in practice. For, she wishes to advocate the more radical, non-superficial change, that is, the development of truly “other songs in different registers.” This requires, as she notes, a “revolution.” While there is a lot of institutional receptivity toward novelty (this generates citations, recognition, buzz, a sense of progress, etc.), the novelty needs to be packaged in what is familiar and often reinforces the “mainstream” status quo by showing the mainstream’s “vitality” and “robustness” (etc.). There is from within the “mainstream” (the “core” etc.) almost no receptivity toward the unfamiliar, especially if the new “songs in different registers” generate considerable opportunity costs to master in authoritative fashion.

The preceding paragraph may sound “too economics-y” for philosophers. But the point is simple and, actually, hopeful. Professional philosophy is embedded in the political economy of higher education. The institutional and political infrastructure of professional philosophy crosses multiple academic institutional regimes (from the civil service, grant-making regime I inhabit in a small country to the elite, wealthy private institutions that rely on fees and donors Stateside). Many of these academic institutional regimes reinforce the status quo in ways that incentivize people to “wall out” Asian philosophies (among others). The discourses that Olberding has analyzed are means in battles over scarce resources within hierarchical structures (prestige hierarchies, different access to resources, differing abilities to shape the discussion, etc.). Servility and supplication are a product of hierarchy, which is itself anchored in, reinforced by, and contributing to a much larger political economy.¹⁶

But with economic development, demographic size, and increasing political power, we are also seeing the rise of *professional* philosophy within Asia not just in the increasing number of hybrid institutions of higher learning that mix “Western” and “Eastern” brands/campuses, but also in state universities in Asia.¹⁷ It is foreseeable that we are about to enter an age in which what counts as “center” and what counts as “periphery” will shift geographically. Analytic philosophy will almost certainly flourish in the short and medium term because of (a) its emphasis on the intellectual division of labor, which fits a *professional* conception of philosophy that operates quite nicely in institutions of higher learning today,¹⁸ and (b) its lack of substance and, thereby, its sponge-like ability to constantly assimilate and domesticate other traditions’ good ideas/tricks/methods.¹⁹

However, it is also quite possible that a rising Asian imperial power will decide to encourage local traditions of thought that with political might behind them will sing “songs” that displace analytical philosophy. But, perhaps, these songs may be too dissonant for Olberding.

Notes

- 1 – Jason Turner, a review of Graham Priest, *One: Being an Investigation into the Unity of Reality and of its Parts, Including the Singular Object which Is Nothingness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), in *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*, September 15, 2015, <https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/60727-one-being-an-investigation-into-the-unity-of-reality-and-of-its-parts-including-the-singular-object-which-is-nothingness/> (accessed December 8, 2016).
- 2 – <http://www.newappsblog.com/2012/06/can-we-make-philosophy-a-little-less-provincial.html>; <http://www.newappsblog.com/2012/06/would-it-be-so-bad-if-indian-and-chinese-philosophy-were-taught-anachronistically.html>; <http://www.newappsblog.com/2014/09/philosophys-western-bias-and-what-can-be-done-about-it.html> (all accessed December 8, 2016).
- 3 – I kept expecting a mention of Judith Butler in addition to Goffman.
- 4 – See Chalmers’ role, as philosophy-of-mind editor for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, in curating discussions about philosophy of mind, at <http://consoc.net/guide.html> (accessed December 8, 2016).
- 5 – See Chalmers’ role in developing the “guidelines” for “oral philosophical discussion in formal settings: colloquia, conferences, seminars, classes, and so on” that was adopted by NYU and widely discussed thereafter. (See, for approving comments, Jennifer Saul, <https://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2014/09/08/guidelines-for-respectful-discussion/> [accessed December 8, 2016]).
- 6 – <http://www.newappsblog.com/2012/06/can-we-make-philosophy-a-little-less-provincial.html>.
- 7 – It does not follow that we should not have provided the platform. But we could have done more to think through the implications of particular speech acts.

- 8 – In part this is due to the fact that at *D&I* almost never allow anonymous commenting. One important reason for this policy, which is naturally conducive to a lot more respectful discussion, is my conviction that judgments (of quality) need to be owned by persons who can be held accountable.
- 9 – See <http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2014/04/on-servility-in-professional-philosophy.html>, and <http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2015/02/on-the-silences-of-leading-philosophers.html> (accessed December 8, 2016).
- 10 – See <http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2014/03/on-basic-philosophical-competence.html>, and <http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2014/04/guest-post-by-joel-katzav-philosophical-competence.html> (accessed December 8, 2016).
- 11 – Some of these posts can be found at <http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/quran/>. I also teach an annual undergraduate module on Islamic political theory. To my students I make the polemical point that Ibn Rushd wrote west of the Netherlands geographically in modern Spain, so by their lights he should count as a “Western” or “European” philosopher (whose work belongs to a tradition prompted by Plato), etc.
- 12 – Cf. Olberding’s discussion of Brian Leiter’s piece at <http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2014/09/ignorance-of-philosophy-and-identity-politics.html> (accessed December 8, 2016).
- 13 – <http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2014/04/on-philosophys-hostility-toward-the-other.html>, and <http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2016/06/on-the-disdain-of-neglected-human-experience.html> (accessed December 8, 2016). See also the significance of the historical Gorgias, who anticipates in an uncanny way a kind of doubling and walling out of bits of philosophy from the start. For scholarly treatment, see Rachel Barney, “Gorgias’s Encomium of Helen,” in *Ten Neglected Classics of Philosophy*, ed. E. Schliesser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).
- 14 – <http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2016/08/humeandthejesuits.html>.
- 15 – I distinguish such gatekeepers from folk like Evan Thompson, Graham Priest (see the epigraph to this essay), Owen Flanagan, or Eric Schwitzgebel, who routinely work in two traditions but also operate as gatekeepers, mediators (etc.). One concept that may be useful to Olberding’s project is Galison’s idea of a “trading zone;” see Peter Galison, “Trading with the Enemy,” in *Trading Zones and Interactional Expertise: Creating New Kinds of Collaboration*, ed. Michael E. Gorman (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2010).
- 16 – This sentence is really an invitation to a would-be-philosophy’s Said. Cf. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

- 17 – A recent visit to the philosophy departments at Yale/NUS and NUS in Singapore taught me that it is quite possible to develop very exciting undergraduate curricula that integrate analytical philosophy and Asian philosophies, as well as lots of bits of history of dynamic intellectual cultures across time and space.
- 18 – <http://www.newappsblog.com/2011/12/is-european-analytic-philosophy-the-way-of-the-future.html> (accessed December 8, 2016).
- 19 – <http://digressionsnimpresions.typepad.com/digressionsnimpresions/2015/07/genius-and-analytical-philosophy.html>, and <http://www.newappsblog.com/2012/02/gary-gutting-is-one-of-the-most-important-and-interesting-intermediaries-between-continental-philosophy-and-mainstream-analyt.html> (accessed December 8, 2016).

Reply to Eric Schliesser



Amy Olberding

I am grateful to Eric Schliesser for his gracious response, and to *Philosophy East and West* and Roger Ames for hosting this discussion. The challenges currently facing the profession regarding exclusionary practices are many, and Schliesser's work at both *NewAPPS* and his newer blog, *Digressions&Impressions*, is sensitive both to how many and how complex these challenges are. Schliesser is correct that my discussion of the profession's conversational patterns is both a bit ungenerous and more than a little ambitious, asking for "revolution" in how the discipline not only talks, but operates. Likewise, Schliesser is right to point out that there are now many, and more than ever before, seeking to probe critically the profession's reflexive habits of mind and, more pertinently, unexamined replications of long-standing hierarchies and sociological patterns. Schliesser's own work on this score is particularly sensitive to several of the issues I address, albeit in different contexts.

In his response, Schliesser observes that I largely neglect many of the more charitable or welcoming remarks sometimes found in the profession's discussions of Asian philosophies. To some extent, this but confesses a familiar psychological effect, the human inclination to attend most to what wounds rather than what pleases. However, it also remarks my own sense of being conflicted about the more generous gestures. Schliesser's parsing of David Chalmers' remarks about Buddhist philosophy of mind captures some of what I find dispiriting: too often even the generous gesture can unintentionally certify or "cement" hierarchies, implicitly casting Asian specialists in a subordinate role. The work of Asian specialists may be found good insofar as